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NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

RESURRECTION AND REBIRTH:-  
AN ENQUIRY INTO THE WORKS OF  
STANLEY SPENCER R.A.  
BETWEEN THE YEARS 1922 - 1932

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO:  
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AND COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES

AND  
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DEPARTMENT OF PAINTING

BY  
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Photograph of Stanley Spencer in Cookham pushing a pram carrying his painting materials.

All this was a long time ago, I remember, and I would do it  
again, but set down

This set down

This: were we led all that way for

Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,

We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,

But had thought they were different; this Birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

We returned to our places, these kingdoms,

But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,

With an alien people clutching their gods.

I should be glad of another death.

T.S. Eliot, 'Journey of the Magi' (1927)



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## INTRODUCTION

In my bedroom at home, when I woke up I used to look out of the open window across to the farmhouse opposite. I simply had to sit up and look out in front of me and the long red roof of the farm with the lovely white pigeons basking in the early morning sun would be right in front of me.... I go for a bathe.... I saunter back home to breakfast and as I walk I think of what joy is before me in the whole day.<sup>1</sup>

(March 1917 to Desmond Chute from Salonika)

Stanley Spencer wrote this letter under extreme circumstances. It was written from the front during the First World War. It tells us much about this extraordinary man and the special relationship he had with his native town of Cookham. For him, the town contained much that was important and central to his work. The town, coupled with visionary experiences, is the core of his work. Through this thesis, I will explore many of the strands which led Spencer to an intensely creative period in his life, the years 1922-32. During this time he completed his two most important works - The Cookham Resurrection (1924-26) and the murals for the Sandham Memorial Chapel, Burghclere. Both undertakings were on a vast scale.

Through this thesis, I will explore the elements of Spencer's character which created these two works and have contributed to Spencer's personal vision. Furthermore, I wish to explore these works, both historically and critically. I shall look at the history of narrative painting and its relationship to the genre of history painting. Through these two genres, one can assess the work in relation to the European Symbolist Movement. From these perspectives, I will draw parallels with Spencer's work and examine his art, not as a purely isolated incident, but place it in context.

Over/.....



As now, he is heralded as some 'great English eccentric'. It is possible to prove quite to the contrary that his work represents much that is contemporary to his time.

Spencer's early life played an important part in his career and personal attitudes. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse in context the role played by this early religious development. From his attendance, both at church and chapel, we can further begin to explore something of the nature of his later religious developments.

Through a lack of formal education, his imagination was allowed to run freely into his drawings and from there into his later developments at the Slade. I shall from there examine the close relationship Professor Tonks had with his pupil.

Spencer's new-found self-confidence, was quickly shattered by his war experiences. He, as many others, suffered dreadful hardships. They also changed Spencer's attitudes towards his art. It is important for us to examine the works from the period 1922-32 in the light of his wartime activities. One provided between the earlier Slade work and his post-war years was the commission for the Ministry of Information, Travoys. This contains many elements of both periods and as a result of this, I will examine the work in close detail.

In my final chapter, I shall examine the relationship between the Cookham Resurrection and the later work, the major end-wall of the Burghclere Chapel, the Resurrection of the Soldiers. Both works, because of their importance in Spencer's career, have been criticised heavily. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse the works in the light of contemporary criticism. Lastly, I will look at Spencer's post-war work in the light of his friend and fellow-artist, Henry Lamb. Lamb provided Spencer with a link between the Slade and his first professional commission, that of the war painting, Travoy.

In writing this thesis, I hope to place the relationship between Spencer the man and Spencer the 'Visionary' and to examine closely the depth of that relationship in the context of the work.

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Early Life

Spencer, in many ways was an extraordinary person and the most important fact about this person was that he came from the village of Cookham. From the outset, he had an obsessional nature; he craved acceptability, while always remaining on the fringe. He was a compulsive painter, often working 12 to 14 hours a day.

He was born on 30 June 1891 at Cookham-on-Thames in Berkshire, the eighth surviving child of William Spencer. The village into which he was born, had changed little in two hundred years. It was essentially rural, depending on agriculture as it's main source of income. The industrial revolution had touched the town very little in Spencer's time. The town's isolation came from it's unusual position. It is built on a plateau surrounded on lower levels by a marsh.

The Spencer family's house had a central position in the village. William Spencer, their father, was a music teacher and therefore, played an important role in the village, acting both as church organist and music teacher. Both Stanley and his younger brother Gilbert were talented artistically. Each of the family members remained individuals, marked out by their precociousness in the arts. They were all educated at home by their father. As they were expected to read their Bible regularly, they developed a strong sense of their religious imaginations early. It was music that was central to them though.



Gilbert Spencer wrote later: 'We grew up with it (music) naturally and could listen and talk at the same time'.<sup>1</sup>

This indicates in a rather interesting way, how integrated cultural pursuits were in their family life. William Spencer also ran a lending library. It exposed Stanley and Gilbert to many of the classics. They read such books as Pilgrim's Progress and Vanity Fair as well as most of Dickens.

In 1903, when Spencer was 12, he began to read Ruskin and to come under his influence. He later became aware of the possibilities of many of Ruskin's ideas for his own work. Ruskin's ideas, those concerning Gothic and Medieval architecture, fired Spencer's imagination.

From a relatively early age, Spencer displayed an ability to draw. Although he was exposed little to the visual arts at home, he did receive encouragement from his parents. The rudimentary education he had, stopped at the age of 12, which left him with much free time to pursue his drawing. It took Spencer a long time to come to terms with his talent, as he remained in isolation from other artists. It was not until he went to the Slade in 1908, that he became more fully aware of his talent and also the volume of art history behind him.

The adoration which he received in early life, contributed to an egotism which was to sustain him through the many years of isolation which he had while painting both the Cookham Resurrection and the Burghclere Chapel projects. But, his egotism proved a handicap when he went looking for patrons.

At this point, I would like to assess the religious upbringing and the climate of the time. To him, religion was a basic belief in God. As a child, the family attended church regularly. In the Spencer household, it was to church in the morning and to the mother's Methodist Chapel in the afternoon, they went. By the 1880's, there was a rift between Chapel and Church. The Anglican church was the church attended by the local landowner, who on many occasions, was related to the vicar. So to many, the Anglican church represented power and wealth.

Methodism came from another tradition, rooted in the rural community, preaching simple and more basic values. They took literal interpretations of the Bible and applied them to everyday life. Methodism had a profound affect on Spencer, but as a child he savoured both churches. In her novel Larkrise to Candleford, Flora Thompson gives us some idea of the hierarchy:

The squire and clergyman's families had pews in the chancel, with backs to the wall on either side, and between them stood two long benches for the schoolchildren, well under the eye of authority. Below the steps down into the nave, stood the harmonium, played by the clergyman's daughter, and round it was ranged the choir of small schoolgirls. Then came the rank and file of the congregation, nicely graded, with the farmer's family in the front row, then the squire's gardener and coachman, the schoolmistress, the maidservants, and the cottagers, with the parish clerk at the back to keep order.<sup>2</sup>

Here we have a good idea of the rigid structure adhered to by a typical Anglican church at the time. This was the church of Spencer's father, which was a marked contrast to the rather more congregational approach of the Methodist church, who always stressed the individual's relationship with God.



It was from this background that Spencer found the characters necessary for his imagination. From his reading of the Bible, he found a source and intermingled that with events in the lives of the inhabitants of Cookham.

By the age of fifteen, he had acquired a number of monographs on Italian Renaissance Art. For the first time he saw the work of Giotto, Fra Angelico and Michelangelo.

It was through religion that, in past ages, the arts became so integral a part of everyday things. The medieval religious artist was employed in his own village just as were the stonemasons, thatchers or joiners. Each village built it's own church and the structure was ornamental with stone-carving and wall painting executed by local craftsmen.<sup>3</sup>

For Spencer, these ideals became a part of his work. From William Spencer, his father, he received these attitudes; his father regarded his son's choice of profession as a rather practical one. William Spencer once said that his son would succeed in becoming quite as good an artist as a builder. In Spencer's approach towards his work, we see this in practice. The way in which he painted is meticulous, starting in one corner, working on it fully and then moving on to another section.





FIG. 1



One can see in his early paintings a fusion of the everyday with events of a profound religious nature. Perhaps the finest example of this is a very early painting, dating from 1911, John Donne arriving in Heaven. (Fig. 1). The painting does not take its subject matter directly from the Bible. The work is an exploration of a sense of wholeness with his surroundings, in this case Widdbrook Common, near Cookham. This painting from 1911, displays his growing interest in the work of John Donne; he had received from a friend a copy of his sermons. Quickly Spencer came to regard Donne as a spiritual mentor. He later said at a lecture: 'I have always loved reading Donne, though I understand little of it .... he seemed to get an impression of Heaven by a side view of it'<sup>4</sup>.

The work, painted during his Slade years, shows an awareness of current trends. The work makes many references to Gauguin, by the way in which the paint is handled as broad flat brushstrokes, creating planes of colour. The figures are positioned in such a way, as to create an illusion of space where in fact the work is quite small. It was included in the second Post-Impressionist Exhibition of 1912 at the Grafton Gallery. It was hung with works by Vlaminck, Picasso, L'hotte and Wyndham Lewis. Henry Tonks, his professor at the Slade, was annoyed by his bowing to the trends of the times and criticised him for it, but Spencer received the full support of his fellow students.

John Donne arriving in Heaven displays an idea, which was later to become central to his work, his awareness of place, in so much as the town of Cookham was for him a microcosm of all the universe. Another sense of place is displayed by the fact that for him, place can have two separate identities, one physical, the other spiritual. To him, a unification was necessary before a place became sacred. He wrote of this unity:

I am very slow at assimilating my surroundings, but once they are, then they begin to have a great meaning. Some artists think that meaning cannot be expressed. Well, I thought the only way to express what I know about Ferris Lane near my home, was to be done as I sometimes have to do it to passing motorists, by just shouting 'first on the right, second on the left'. I should just burst. I shall do a painting some day with these words as the title.<sup>5</sup>

Prior to going to the Slade, he had little knowledge of art history. His taste was the popular taste of the time, Rossetti, Millais and a well-known local artist, Frederick Walker. In 1907, Spencer attended the Maidenhead Technical Institute and stayed there for a year. By 1908, he was ready to attend the Slade.



## CHAPTER TWO

### The Slade Years

The years spent at the Slade were important for Spencer. Cookham had been his entire world until that time. These new events happening in his life confronted him with a larger vision of the world.

At the Slade during this time, there was an emphasis on art history, not just British, but European also. This for Spencer, opened up a new range of possibilities. The Slade at the time was against modernist thinking.

C. Campbell Ross, Secretary of the Whitechapel Art Gallery - in an introduction to his catalogue on Twentieth Century Art, a Review of Modern Movements (1914), which came out of the school - classified it's artists into four separate groups:

1. ....influence of Walter Sickert....  
sordid scenes in a sprightly manner  
(i.e. the Camden town group).
2. ....influence of Puvis de Chavannes,  
Alphonse Legros and Augustus John....  
imposing, decorative design....  
not merely that of a satisfying 'pattern'....
3. the latter Impressionists....  
Cezanne 'designing in volumes'  
(i.e. the Bloomsbury artists).
4. work which has abandoned representation....  
established a 'Rebel Art Centre'.  
(i.e. the Vorticists). <sup>2</sup>

Spencer went to London for his interview at the Slade in 1908 with Professor Brown - Tonks being his assistant at the time. Two years later, Brown retired and Tonks became Head of Painting. His influence on the students was great. He ruled the department in an authoritarian way, adhering to the academy system of teaching. It had an emphasis on looking and observing through drawing. Spencer later wrote about Tonks: 'Tonks taught me drawing and was very critical of it....' In 1911 he wrote, 'this is what Tonks says:

Don't copy, but try and express the shape you draw; don't think about the paper and the flatness of it; think of the form and the roundness of the form.... Think of those bones, those beautiful sweeps and curves they have.... Photos don't express anything and yours are too much a photograph'.<sup>2</sup>

For Tonks and the professors at the Slade, John was something of a hero. As for Spencer and his fellow students, John was a style of painting which had long gone out of fashion. In Europe, with the advent of Post-Impressionism, many of the traditional nineteenth century values were cast aside. John was to them the embodiment of a vigorous form of painting which celebrated the human form, purely for what it was. John's letters of 1907, reveal a disillusionment with the changes taking place among his contemporaries in Britain: 'I am getting clearer about colour tho' still very ignorant; with a little more knowledge, I shall at last begin....'<sup>3</sup>



There are similarities between Spencer and John, but to say that he was influenced directly would be wrong. They both drew on similar sources of inspiration, that of the great early Renaissance masters, Giotto in particular, for his use of dramatic gesture. But, where they differ is in place of John's linear sweeping gestures, Spencer's work uses pattern and distortion to dramatic effect. Spencer emerges as a superior artist in my opinion. He lacked interest in naturalism which would have limited him and his vision. Instead, he distorts the forms of his characters, so as to emphasise a particular mood in the work.

Spencer found it difficult to adjust to life at the Slade. He was rather shy and found it hard to make friends in the beginning. It was not until his third year, that he began to form friendships, as until then, he had not socialised with his fellow students. Henry Lamb and Jaques Raverat were perhaps his first real friends there. All during his years at the Slade, he never lost his feelings for Cookham. As his nickname was 'Cookham' in the school, one can see from this how important the town was to him. It was to remain for many years a potent image in his work.

Spencer was never encouraged to paint in oils at the Slade. He had the idea that he was there to learn to draw and not to paint - if he wanted to paint, he could learn that alone. By his third year, Tonks spoke of him 'as having the most original mind of anyone we have had here at the Slade'.



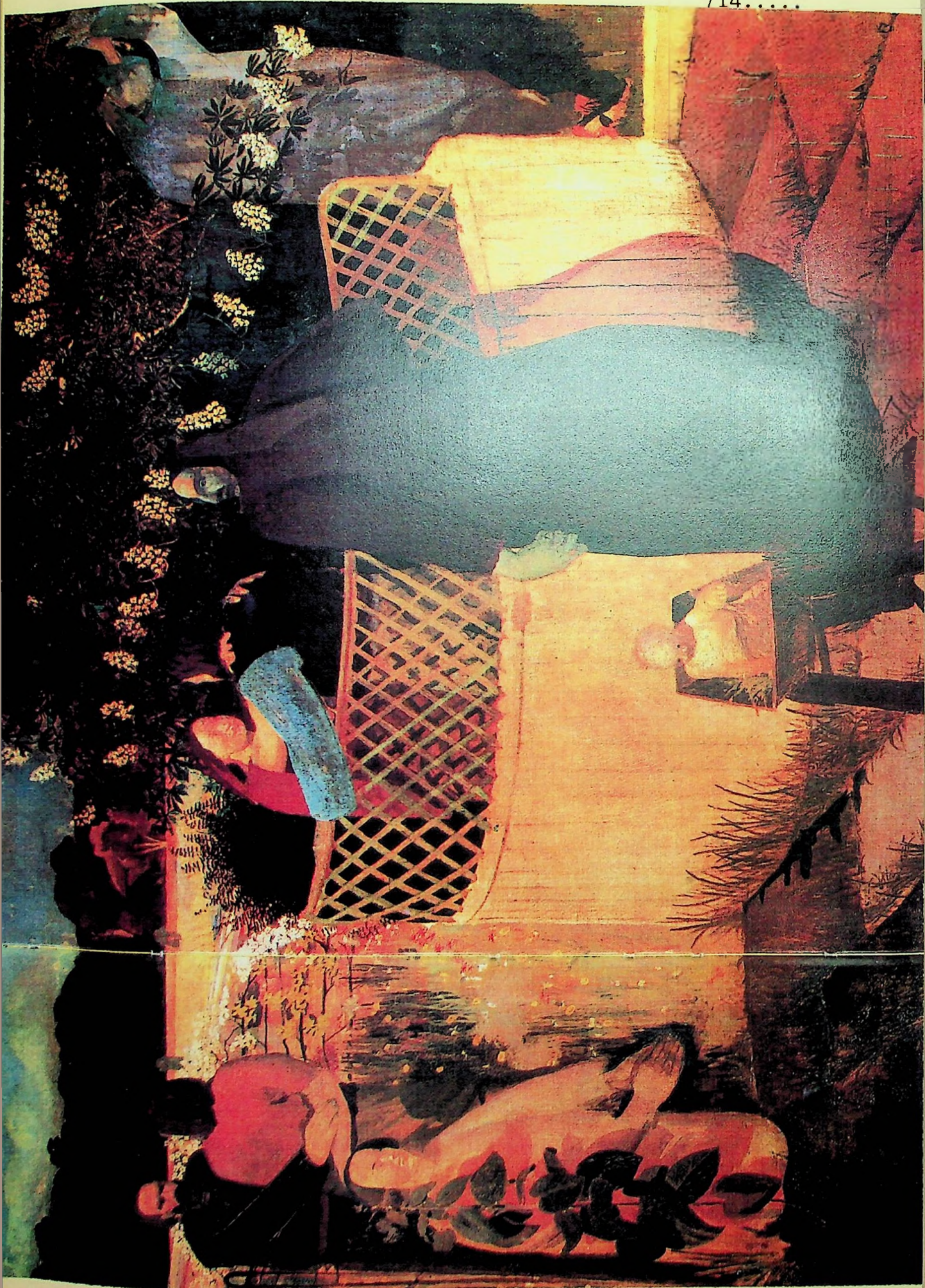


FIG. 2



His painting in 1912, The Nativity (Fig. 2), won him the Melville Nettleship and composition prizes. During his years at the school, few were aware of his painting, but soon he began to develop a reputation. As early as 1911, he had begun to experiment in oils - Two Girls and a Beehive (1910), The Nativity and Jochim among the Shepherds (1912). All show a harking back to the formality of Piero della Francesca's Nativity in the way in which Spencer uses heavy, simplified forms of the figures. These figures are arranged in isolated groups, divided by fences. Not only does Spencer draw upon Piero for inspiration, but as Andrew Causey has pointed out, 'the figure of Joseph bears a resemblance in reverse to Botticelli's Mercury in Primavera'.<sup>6</sup>

We can see at this stage a growing eclecticism in Spencer's work. There are influences also in the work, of the Pre-Raphaelites, in so much as the formal compositional qualities of the work remain, while imposing a stylized reflection of nature on the setting.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The War Years

The war years were a time of exceptional upheaval for many. Spencer, like so many others of the time, enlisted on a wave of nationalistic fever. It was for him, a time of great turmoil; both artistically and spiritually. Artistically in the sense that his work remained neglected during the war, apart from some small sketches. For example, Swan Upping at Cookham (1915-19), was begun on his return home after the Slade and was not completed until after the war. Spiritually he suffered through his constant exposure to danger. For Spencer, it was only his second time away from Cookham. By the time war was declared in 1914, Spencer had left the Slade and had begun to work alone.

Despite his lack of interest in politics, or more generally in current affairs, he still felt a need to enlist. By July 1915, he was summoned to report for duty as an orderly at the R.A.M.C., at the Beaufort Hospital, Bristol. He wrote of there later, 'I was always prepared to do anything I was ordered to do'.<sup>1</sup>

He put into practice much of what he had read in St. Augustin's confessions:

Gloryifying God in all his different performances, ever busy, ever at rest, gathering yet never needing; bearing; filling; guarding; creating; nourishing; perfecting.<sup>2</sup>



The two years he spent at the hospital, 1915-17, were relatively peaceful. He took pride in his menial work, but longed for active military service. By 1917, he was posted to Macedonia. The need to play an active role in the war satisfied a need to prove himself to others. This proved for him impossible, as he was physically unfit and was unable to keep up with the final offensive and ended active service in the base hospital in Salonika.

The war had broken Spencer's peace of mind to such a degree that his work suffered considerably. It was not until the early 1920's, that he managed to regain the will to work. This unsettlement provided him with many of the ideas and inspirations he needed to complete the two major projects. His brother Gilbert later wrote: 'the old island feeling is going'.<sup>3</sup> This was with reference to Spencer's feelings concerning Cookham. Paralled with this attitude was the loss of his peace of mind.

His artistic output during these years was limited. He completed some portraits of his fellow soldiers. This became a discipline for him, which was to remain for the rest of his life. Most of these drawings and notebooks were lost in the final offensive. During his military career, he showed some remarkable examples of courage, while in Macedonia, he managed to save the life of his commanding officer.

His respect for his superiors was rather mixed, though while showing loyalty, he remained distrustful of those above him in rank. It was something that stayed with him for a long time and stemmed from his lack of a formal education.





FIG. 3



/19.....

He adjusted well to military life, despite a complete lack of experience or even experience of life in general.

The bravery which he showed, came from the innocence of not realising the dangers he faced - he would advance regardless of the consequences.

In 1917, he was requested by A. Yockney, of the Ministry of Information, to work on a painting, a subject of his own choosing. This painting was to form part of an official collection of art from the First World War. By that time, he was in active service and it proved difficult to obtain leave. It was not until after the war, that he was able to carry out the commission. The work was entitled Travoys with wounded soldiers arriving at a dressing station (Fig. 3) and was completed in 1919. The work depicts a scene at night in September 1916, after an attack on the 22nd division, on Machine Gun Hill, in the Dorian-Varder Sector of the battlefield.

'I was at Smol, near the little Greek church, used this night as an operating theatre. It was memory of this that I had, when I did The Travoys'.

Over/.....



For Spencer, it was his first major commission and it was the culmination of his war experiences. This work is a precursor of the later paintings. Namely, The Cookham Resurrection and The Burghclere Memorial Chapel. The atmosphere of the painting is one of spiritual peace; a contentment which he found in Cookham and found again in Salonika. Although the scene depicted is a terrible one, he said:

But I felt there was a grandeur.... all those wounded men were calm and at peace with everything, so that pain was a small thing with them. I felt there was a spiritual ascendancy over everything.<sup>5</sup>

The painting is a large work and is intended to be seen as such. One is drawn back to the centre - to the inert figures on the travoys or stretchers, whose bodies are covered by blankets. We are given no clues as to their identities, as their faces are covered. The light and colour are probably the most important aspects of the work. The light comes from the operating theatre in the background and is shown to us in a golden ochre glow. By painting the work in such a way, it defines the atmosphere quite clearly. Travoys gives us an idea of Spencer's regard for his work in Salonika. The work involved transporting the injured by mule to the hospitals. It was difficult work, as Spencer was small in stature and the mules would fall under their burden, so he had to catch the falling casualties. By December 1918, the war for him was over; he was invalided home with malaria and by 1919 he had begun the work.

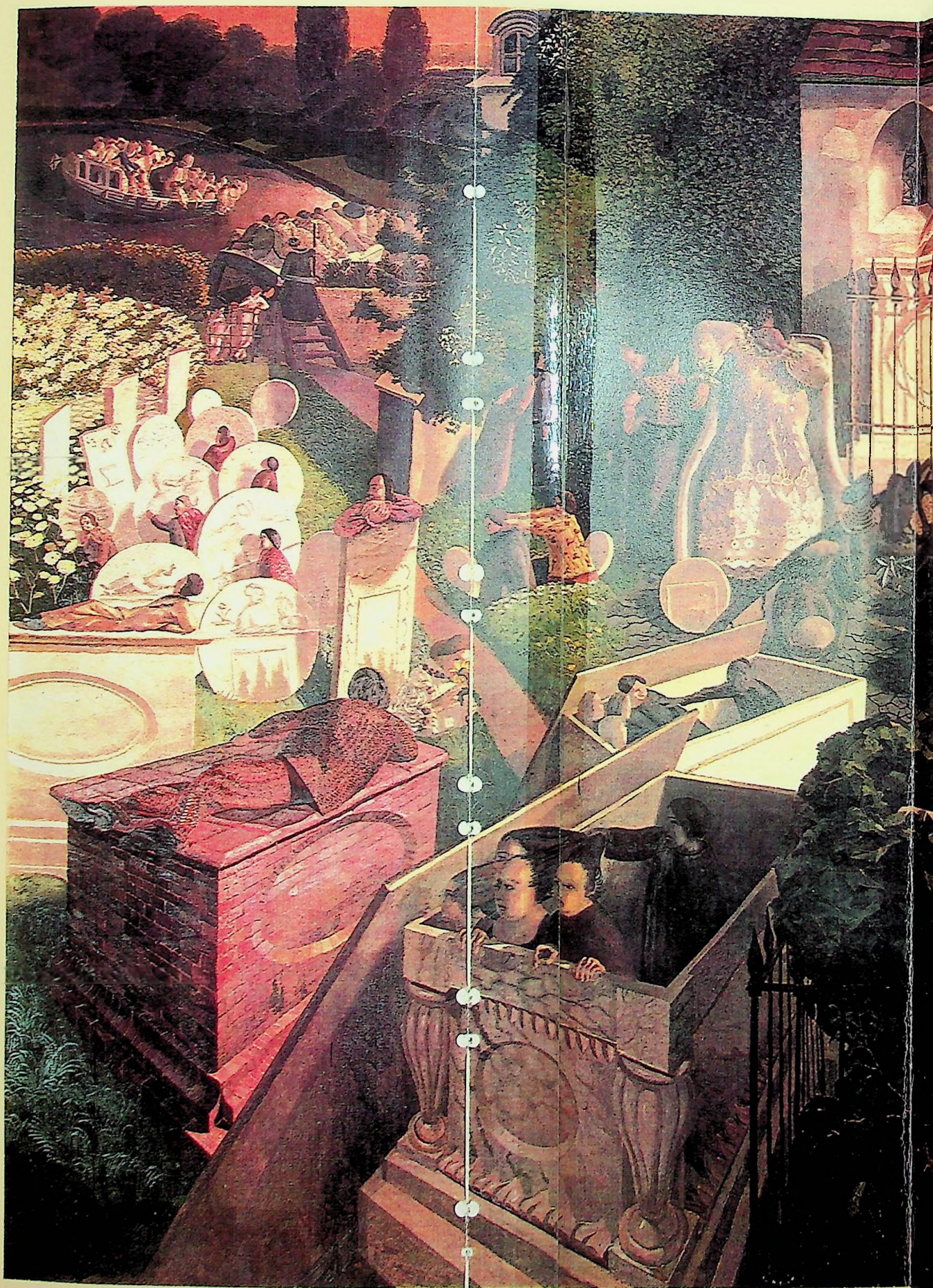
On his return to Cookham, there was an intense sense of relief. Coupled with this frustration and a restlessness, the commission presented him with an enormous task, as he had no notes to work from. He had to rely alone on his memories of Salonika. This makes the work all the more remarkable. Furthermore, he gained some comfort from painting, although it was some years before he fully regained his peace of mind. This solitude went partially towards restoring this. The painting was completed in August 1919. He was commissioned to paint two more works, but by that time he said: 'Somehow, I seem to have lost the thread of my "Balkonish feelings"'.<sup>6</sup>

I was right in making it a happy picture, as early painters were right in making the crucifixion a happy painting.<sup>7</sup>

This attitude was picked up immediately by the public. When shown in Burlington House it was a success.

This was the end of the war for him, but there remained many ideas to be further developed. The war had proved for Spencer a traumatic experience, which was to utterly change the course of his work over the next ten years.





The Resurrection, Cookham

FIG. 4



## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Cookham Ressurrection (See Fig. 4)

Spencer's career can be divided into two parts, with the first part being the period up to and including the war which marked a turning point in his work. Until that time, the work had retained an element of freshness - by freshness, I mean a certain innocence which isolation provided him with. The Slade, gave him the skills he needed to express the vast range of ideas and experiences which came his way during the war years.

Spencer, during the war, had an idea to depict these experiences on a grand scale. In 1924, he had the idea of working on a large painting. It was to convey his sense of release and gratitude for his survival and homecoming from the war.

This painting was to become the Cookham Resurrection. It proved to be his most ambitious project to date. The Resurrection took only two years to complete; he commenced working on it in February 1924 and by 3 March 1926, it was finished. This painting was to become perhaps his most important work, as it expressed clearly much of what he felt about his native town Cookham and it's inhabitants.

The painting is set in the town's churchyard, with the Thames Valley in the distance. He chose it as somewhere well known to him.



The painting describes it's narrative in a passive way. This is shown in it's depiction of figures. For example, the prophets, those who lie against the church wall, are described in a somnolent manner, each of whom is draped in a shroud, lying immobile and reflective. It is possible to compare the shroud with a nightshirt. It is clear that the figures here are awakening out of a deep sleep, to experience a new salvation. A sense of tranquility pervades them.

The painting adopts an open form of composition - by this the figures form a fan around a central pivot, that pivot being the church porch covered in roses. In the porch are God the Father, Christ with a child in his arms and to their left are all the attendant prophets. The leader being Moses holding the tablets, with Ezikel, Issac and John the Baptist.

Apart from these Biblical figures, he uses other more recognisable characters. There are two self-portraits. One in the bottom right-hand corner, is caught between two collapsing brick tombstones. Spencer has painted himself nude, resting between two headstones. By him kneels his brother-in-law, Richard Carline. The stance of the figure is reminiscent of Bronzino's Allegory in the National Gallery, London. As Spencer must have been familiar with this work during his Slade years, it is quite likely he took the pose of the central figure in the Allegory and adapted it to his brother-in-law.

Many figures and in particular those of the prophets, refer to Michelangelo's figures of the prophets and sybils on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. His wife, Hilda Carline appears three times. On one occasion she is smelling flowers; on another lying in an ivy-clad tomb, half buried, at the foot of the painting and then, as she climbs out and over the stile, heading towards the river.

### The Role of Figuration in the Work

'The Holy Suburb of Heaven'.

Thus John Donne describes a churchyard. It is a place of rest and contemplation, somewhere that is on the fringe of Heaven. For Spencer, this idea was central and if we are to make sense of the work, then the churchyard must be viewed in this light.

Spencer's figures arise in a spirit of joy upon arrival at this holy place. He wished to make an analogy between the contemplation achieved in the painting by the viewer and the reading of a good book. He wanted us to view the painting as a series of episodes. The work as seen from this perspective, allows us to view it in a more partial way. By this I mean, to contemplate each individual as they arise, as well as the overall effect of the work. Subsequently, we follow the painting through it's events, to an overall conclusion; that of the 'joy' of these people at being redeemed.



Duncan Robinson wrote:

The Resurrection holds very little terror, as it's shown here; indeed Spencer referred invariably to the joys represented. His souls awaken slowly to a reality in which the senses are revived to permit recognition and greeting.<sup>1</sup>

In 1937, Spencer wrote of the work:

No one is in any hurry in this painting. Here and there things slowly move off, but in the main, they resurrect to such a state of joy, that they are content to remain where they have resurrected. In this life, we experience a kind of resurrection when we arrive at a state of awareness, a state of being in love and at such times, we like to do again, what we have done many times in the past, because we do it anew in Heaven.<sup>2</sup>

### Further Story Telling

The way in which one sees this painting in terms of a book, provides us with a key towards an understanding of the work.

Historically, there have always been links between literature and the visual arts in England. Central to Victorian Painting, for instance, has been a literal, story telling tradition. But, the nature of narration goes much further back. Right back to the medieval period, there was a definite emphasis on the role of narration. Many of the meditation books such as The Books of Hours, brought aspects of a particular Biblical or religious story to light. Right through the Renaissance period, the role of the symbolic story or allegory was a necessary part of painting.





FIG. 5



In the Renaissance, artists relied not purely on the meditational aspects of life, but rather glorifying their patrons or events in their lives. These paintings relied little on historical accuracy; their main purpose was to reflect the lives and power of the patrons. As the age of enlightenment dawned, the role of portraiture began to have increasing prominence, but as early as the Tudor period, this type of work began to show itself.

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This painting acts as a link between two different traditions, that of the portrait and of the history painting. The Ambassadors pointed the way for much of the work of the 18th century and it can thus be said that it was ahead of its time. In Southern Europe, history painting remained the most important genre. It was regarded by the academics as the highest form of art. As this genre declined in the early 19th century, another was to take its place in popularity.

Although, some outstanding historical paintings were produced, artists concentrated on more narrative scenes as subject matter. They turned towards domestic, daily scenes for inspiration. An example of this is Courbet's, A Burial at Ornans (1849-50) - a painting which because of it's size, led to much controversy, as it elevates a rather mundane scene to the level of a history painting. This outraged the public, who were led in their aesthetic views by the academy.

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Following on from this form of narration came The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. This group was set up in 1848 in opposition to much of what Wright and his contemporaries had stood for. They rejected much of the scientific and industrial revolution, in favour of a more, as they saw it, elevated style of painting. Their impact was rapid and in fact, they became the establishment fairly quickly. James Harding, in his essay, gives us some idea of this:

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## Symbolism

As a complete reaction against this narrative form in painting, in 1888 a movement sprung up that was later regarded as The Symbolist Movement. It had its origins in certain values. The writer Jules Christophe attempted to define its nature:

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In a political response against materialism, many turned towards anarchism as a means to vent their anger by a negation of all social responsibilities. Artists such as James Ensor or the American Symbolist poet, Stuart Merrill, found a means of coping with something that had grown out of all proportion, the threat of external materialism. Many similarities can be drawn between Spencer and the Symbolist painters. Spencer's world is something that he alone created. The world represented a retreat from all that was material. Although in much of the work portrays the family, his friends and the town of Cookham, by portraying them as he does, he attempts to unify both sides and make sense of his world.

After Spencer's experiences of the war, it was a release to come back to Cookham. It provided a retreat from the horrors he suffered. So too was the experience of many Symbolist painters who retreated from the world, a fleeing from reality. Painters such as, Fernand Khnopff, who retreated to a medieval house in Bruges or Gauguin, who went to the south seas for consolation. Each artist attempted to achieve through solitude, a greater understanding of their work. To the contrary, much of the work lacked real depth. By depth, I mean that Symbolist painting remained vague, as for as an awareness of all that was taking place in Europe of the time, such as, the growth of industrialisation and in painting naturalism and realism.



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Many of their ideas insisted on a concrete form of expression. This was achieved through symbols at the same time rejecting the notion of representation in conventional terms, such as pure beauty. All too often beauty, for them lay in the idea and not in the symbol, therefore, many of the works lacked content.

By 1900, these contradictions were evident to many of the artists. They subsequently turned towards nature or rejected symbolism altogether. Symbolism stemmed from the artists ability to convey the meaning in a piece of work, through the creative process itself and not merely depending on the depiction of external objects.

Spencer's early work up to and including the Resurrection, acts out as a metaphor for a vision of the world and the world beyond. Spencer uses 'the churchyard' to reveal his ideal vision of a perfect world. Life and death are juxtaposed in an array of characters and events, all contained in a single work. The painting stands for a retreat from the mundane order of things.

The churchyard, a place familiar to all in Cookham, bears little resemblance to an ordinary churchyard. Quite to the contrary, the churchyard is equated with a notion of Heaven and it's order.

To Spencer, Heaven was Cookham, just as for Donne the 'holy suburb' was Heaven. He saw it as a place where people gathered together to rise up on the last day in the presence of God.

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This vision was to have the ability to formulate, firstly in his mind, a clear picture of what he set out to do. Furthermore, he saw in his vision that an overall perception of the world was necessary to maintain this vision. Coupled with this perception is an inspiration he received from his subject matter. For example, when asked to complete a Raising of Lazarus, he said: 'I think the only way to paint a picture of this incident would be to do all Christ did, "First" to rejoice and thank God and then do the picture'.

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FIG. 8 & 9

'If what an artist does comes from the stem of Jesse, then it should be clearly apparent in everything the artist does'.<sup>8</sup>

Such an approach, be it a practical one, demonstrates how Spencer wished the painting to be a witness on one level to his faith and on another to his particular sense of place.

In essence, the piece is tranquil and this is reflected by the way in which it's characters are portrayed. But that peace which is in the work is not exclusively a spiritual one. It is also something which is created by the figures themselves.

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Charles Morice on the growth of materialism in Paris in 1889, saw the world as thus. In his writings, the only salvation for mankind is through art. For Morice, art should not reflect reality, i.e. Symbolist art, but it should not reflect the individuality of the artist also, but should strive for an awareness of something beyond the merely physical. This is where the problems lay with theorists, such as Morice. They were prepared to make claims for art, such as, an idealised manifestation of their imagination, as in the work of Odilon Redon (1840 - 1916) - (Fig. 8 & 9).





FIG. 10



He saw much of the Symbolist movement as a:

Synthesis of thought would free self-expression from the limits of particular philosophies; that of the idea would create a new fiction, following the example of Wagner and that of forms of expression would use techniques of suggestion to open the way to achievements of unprecented complexity.<sup>10</sup>

From this idealised stance came much ambiguity; the ideas advocated by Morice, became impossible to articulate, as much of the work was lost in the lack of and a realistic space.

In 1923, Spencer was appraoched by the Behrend family in order to undertake a project which would take the next nine years to complete. He was to paint a series of murals for a memorial chapel in remembrance of Mrs. Behrend's brother, Lieutenant Henry Willoughby Sandham R.A.S.C., who died of an illness contracted on active service in Macedonia in 1919.

The back wall of the church consists of a single work, depicting the Resurrection of the Soldiers (Fig. 10). The whole project was a monumental one by anyone's standards. 'His experience of the war was too overwhelming to be expressed in paintings on an ordinary scale'.



The painting describes it's narrative in a passive way. This is shown in it's depiction of figures. For example, the prophets, those who lie against the church wall, are described in a somnolent manner, each of whom is draped in a shroud, lying immobile and reflective. It is possible to compare the shroud with a nightshirt. It is clear that the figures here are awakening out of a deep sleep, to experience a new salvation. A sense of tranquility pervades them.

The painting adopts an open form of composition - by this the figures form a fan around a central pivot, that pivot being the church porch covered in roses. In the porch are God the Father, Christ with a child in his arms and to their left are all the attendant prophets. The leader being Moses holding the tablets, with Ezikel, Issac and John the Baptist.

Apart from these Biblical figures, he uses other more recognisable characters. There are two self-portraits. One in the bottom right-hand corner, is caught between two collapsing brick tombstones. Spencer has painted himself nude, resting between two headstones. By him kneels his brother-in-law, Richard Carline. The stance of the figure is reminiscent of Bronzino's Allegory in the National Gallery, London. As Spencer must have been familiar with this work during his Slade years, it is quite likely he took the pose of the central figure in the Allegory and adapted it to his brother-in-law.

Many figures and in particular those of the prophets, refer to Michelangelo's figures of the prophets and sybils on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. His wife, Hilda Carline appears three times. On one occasion she is smelling flowers; on another lying in an ivy-clad tomb, half buried, at the foot of the painting and then, as she climbs out and over the stile, heading towards the river.

### The Role of Figuration in the Work

'The Holy Suburb of Heaven'.

Thus John Donne describes a churchyard. It is a place of rest and contemplation, somewhere that is on the fringe of Heaven. For Spencer, this idea was central and if we are to make sense of the work, then the churchyard must be viewed in this light.

Spencer's figures arise in a spirit of joy upon arrival at this holy place. He wished to make an analogy between the contemplation achieved in the painting by the viewer and the reading of a good book. He wanted us to view the painting as a series of episodes. The work as seen from this perspective, allows us to view it in a more partial way. By this I mean, to contemplate each individual as they arise, as well as the overall effect of the work. Subsequently, we follow the painting through it's events, to an overall conclusion; that of the 'joy' of these people at being redeemed.



Duncan Robinson wrote:

The Resurrection holds very little terror, as it's shown here; indeed Spencer referred invariably to the joys represented. His souls awaken slowly to a reality in which the senses are revived to permit recognition and greeting.<sup>1</sup>

In 1937, Spencer wrote of the work:

No one is in any hurry in this painting. Here and there things slowly move off, but in the main, they resurrect to such a state of joy, that they are content to remain where they have resurrected. In this life, we experience a kind of resurrection when we arrive at a state of awareness, a state of being in love and at such times, we like to do again, what we have done many times in the past, because we do it anew in Heaven.<sup>2</sup>

### Further Story Telling

The way in which one sees this painting in terms of a book, provides us with a key towards an understanding of the work.

Historically, there have always been links between literature and the visual arts in England. Central to Victorian Painting, for instance, has been a literal, story telling tradition. But, the nature of narration goes much further back. Right back to the medieval period, there was a definite emphasis on the role of narration. Many of the meditation books such as The Books of Hours, brought aspects of a particular Biblical or religious story to light. Right through the Renaissance period, the role of the symbolic story or allegory was a necessary part of painting.





FIG. 5



In the Renaissance, artists relied not purely on the meditational aspects of life, but rather glorifying their patrons or events in their lives. These paintings relied little on historical accuracy; their main purpose was to reflect the lives and power of the patrons. As the age of enlightenment dawned, the role of portraiture began to have increasing prominence, but as early as the Tudor period, this type of work began to show itself.

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## Symbolism

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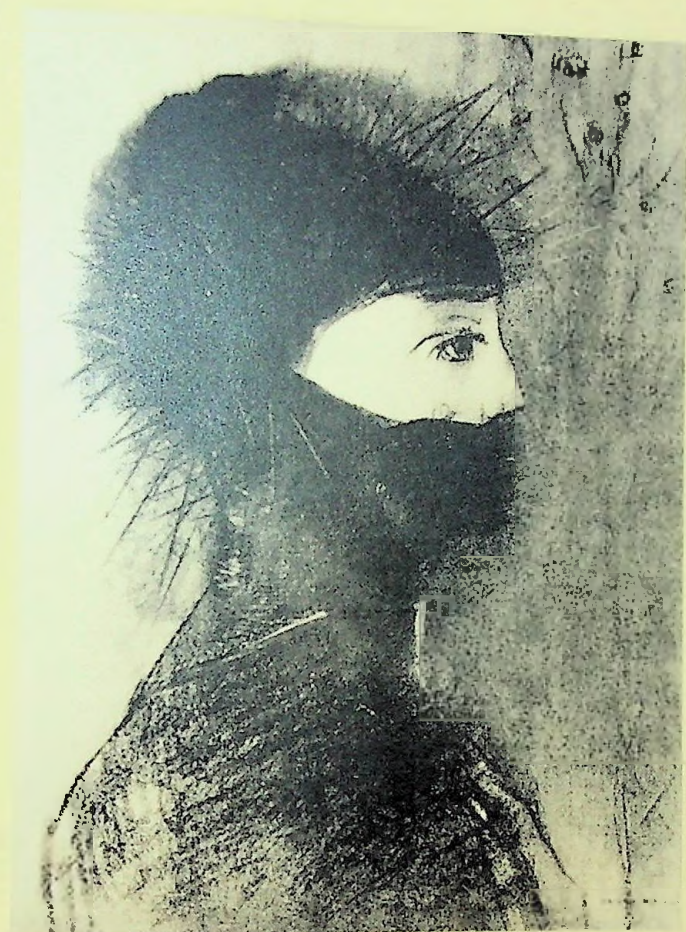


FIG. 8 & 9

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Synthesis of thought would free self-expression from the limits of particular philosophies; that of the idea would create a new fiction, following the example of Wagner and that of forms of expression would use techniques of suggestion to open the way to achievements of unprecented complexity. 42

From this idealised stance came much ambiguity; the ideas advocated by Morice, became impossible to articulate, as much of the work was lost in the lack of and a realistic space.

In 1923, Spencer was appraoched by the Behrend family in order to undertake a project which would take the next nine years to complete. He was to paint a series of murals for a memorial chapel in remembrance of Mrs. Behrend's brother, Lieutenant Henry Willoughby Sandham R.A.S.C., who died of an illness contracted on active service in Macedonia in 1919.

The back wall of the church consists of a single work, depicting the Resurrection of the Soldiers (Fig. 10). The whole project was a monumental one by anyone's standards. 'His experience of the war was too overwhelming to be expressed in paintings on an ordinary scale'.



Perhaps this painting represented the ultimate form of expression for him. Spencer had such a profound hatred of violence; through this work he enabled himself to come to terms with it. By his non-depiction of violence, he reveals other more important aspects of army life. As fighting occupies such a small part of a soldier's life, the other more mundane activities take on a greater significance and Spencer glorifies them. Elizabeth Rothenstein wrote of the work:

Here he has painted the awakened soldiers holding crosses. At first, they only handle them, exploring them unknowingly. He shows the growth of understanding in all its various stages until at last in the full light of revelation, the soldiers know that in suffering and death, they have triumphed and they are shown embracing their crosses in ecstasy'.<sup>11</sup>

The painting forms a focal point for the chapel. It unifies the different elements of the building and murals, through to the ultimate conclusion as the soldiers hand their white crosses to Christ.

The unifying force of passivism, which pervades the work is reflected by Spencer's beliefs. His experience of war was too overwhelming to be expressed in paintings on an ordinary scale. Subsequently as the project grew in size, so did his need....

to leave to posterity memorials of his life, human relations and environment on a vast scale, but also in minute detail, so as to avoid 'something of me being left out'.<sup>12</sup>

There is a completeness by the way in which each character is portrayed. As with the Cookham Resurrection, there remains the tranquility, the peace. The lack of violence is summed up in the figure at the centre of the work. He lies on a door and contemplates the crucifix before him. He is completely absorbed in it and appears to have no idea of all going on around him.

There is also a lack of confusion in the painting. Despite so much activity, this contributes to this feeling of peace. It appears that the work is set as a battle has finished. There is a triumph over the present situation.

As in the Cookham Resurrection, both represent the resurrection that is set to release humanity from the drudgery of everyday life. In the Cookham Resurrection, it is from the domestic and familiar circumstances of his home town. In the Burghclere work, the horrors of war are triumphed over. Contained in the work are scenes of hope and reconciliation. The shaking of hands in the dug-outs, as the soldiers unite under their crosses. The mules painted in the background rest after completing their work.

The role of Jesus is an interesting one. He, as in the Cookham piece, is painted as a background character. He is shown as somewhat effeminate, in a flowing robe, much like a nightshirt. They bring their crosses to him in supplication, as they shed their earthly existence and receive a renewed spiritual life. The face of Jesus is painted with a strange expression; he appears the least tranquil, in fact he seems annoyed by them.



Another feature is the occupations of the soldiers. As with the Cookham Resurrection, we are witness to their daily work. They are more prominent in the Burghclere painting. Their work is carried out with almost mundane simplicity. They act out all they are set to do in a distracted way. One reads letters he received from home, another plays with a pet tortoise, another rolls up his leggings. Each soldier performs their task with exhaustion and boredom. A soldier cuts his comrade out of barbed-wire; the man freed appears indifferent to the act, but the original is witnessed by a soldier ascending from his grave.

It was to the churchyard in both it's forms to which Spencer turned; it was the place of his grandparents burial. It was here he played with his brothers and from time to time he walked in grief. It was here he first began to draw. To Spencer, the role of the churchyard was synonymous with that of the resurrection. Both types of churchyard were places of rest.

The Resurrection of the Good and Bad is a work dating from an earlier period (1915). The work is a diptych. One panel portrays the good arising, the second the bad. It is a far darker painting than the previously discussed two and is painted in a rather conventional manner. Perhaps, most importantly for us, it reveals the germ of an idea for the two later paintings. For this point alone, the work deserves merit.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Critical Response

The Resurrection of the Soldiers (Fig. 10) received a mixed reaction from both the critics and the general public. From his fellow artists it was landed as a major work. As a mark of this respect he was asked to become a member of the Royal Academy.

Edward Fitzsimmonds wrote....

One cannot think of the strange, straining figures as being in anyway grotesque; one simply acknowledges the transforming power of Spencer's imagination.<sup>1</sup>

Other critics were not so well disposed towards the work: 'the world seems populated with Spencer-like figures, lurching blundering along, intent on some private domestic drama'.<sup>2</sup>



This criticism was taken from a review by Francis Spalding of the show 'Stanley and Hilda Spencer', Anthony D'Offay (1978). Spencer's work has never been well received by the critics. The work has remained much open to debate on both sides. He has had his strong champions, for the most part by the Rothensteins. In opposition to his work were the critics guided by the Royal Academy with which Spencer has had stormy relations. In a review of the R.A. show of 1980, Francis Watson has said of it:

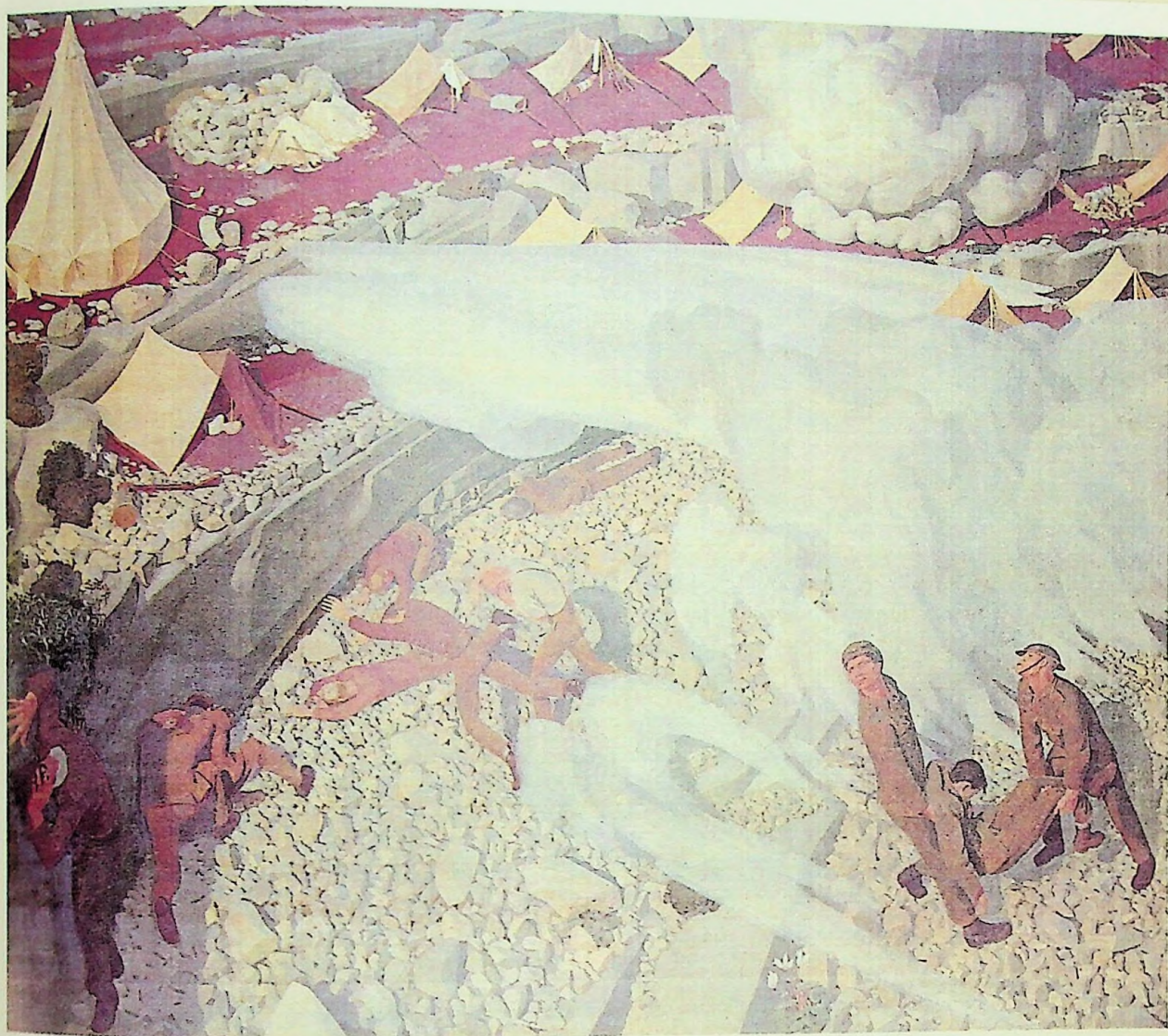
the distortions which once made for controversy are, of course, partly expressionistic, but also compositional, especially in the larger works. Painted 'academically they would be unendurable'.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps a reason for the difficulties found by critics in his work is perhaps relating to the relative marginality of the work. Both the artist and his work defies a distinct categorization into any particular art movement. John Rothenstein in Modern English Painters (1952) wrote:

Spencer refused to submit and from time to time, engaged national attention with a canvas too large, too tumultuous and too intensely alive to be ignored.<sup>4</sup>

The recognition he has received, has remained negligible. His work, far from being landed as the work by some great English eccentric, has come in for a certain amount of neglect. As his volume of work increased, it is clear that there is considerable unevenness in quality. If one were to see the complete works clearly, it is the pre-war paintings which display a greater depth of understanding of it's subject-matter. By this I mean, they portray a level of awareness of a sense of place which relates directly back to it's subject-matter.





Henry Lamb, *Irish Troops in the Judaeen Hills surprised by a Turkish Bombardment* (oil on canvas),  
72 x 86



Spencer and Henry Lamb

Spencer met Henry Lamb during his latter years at the Slade. They met through a mutual friend, Spencer's future brother-in-law, Richard Carline. Although Lamb was an intimate of the Bloomsbury group, due to his involvement with Rodger Fry and the Omega workshops, he nevertheless maintained close contact with many of his fellow artists from the Slade. Originally Lamb trained in medicine and gave it up to become an artist, but with the outbreak of the war, he returned to medicine with renewed vigour. In March 1919, he was asked to paint a Palestinian scene, by the Ministry of Information. The work which resulted from this commission was Irish Troops in the Judean Hills surprised by a Turkish Bombardment (72 X 86) - (Fig. 11). This work was to establish Lamb's career as an artist.

There are comparisons to be drawn between Lamb's war painting and Spencer's Travoys of 1919 (Fig. 3). Both works were painted at the same time; both depict scenes from the Balkans, though different areas. This work by Lamb shows nothing of his earlier work, that is, the work completed during his Slade years. The work dating from this period was mainly Post-Impressionistic in style. Irish Troops has a harder, more linear quality to it than the earlier work. It depicts a gas attack made on the Judean Hills. The men shown flee. They cover their heads, desperately trying to escape the encroaching gas. The gas is painted in a solid form, as if it's decending in sheets down on top of the men. One figure lies inert under a cloud; perhaps he is dead.

Both Spencer's and Lamb's work, show similiar types of terrain. Spencer paints the consequences of Lamb's work, the suffering of the aftermath. Both artists paint their figures in a similiar style. They create exaggerated postures for the characters.

Over/.....

This exaggerated posturing is used to great effect, in particular in the case of Lamb's work. It gives us a marvellous illusion of fear.

Where the works differ is in atmosphere. Lamb's painting shows us a harsh environment. The jagged stones against the extraordinarily red earth is stark. This painting lacks the peacefulness of Spencer's Travoys. There is little doubt that Lamb's depiction of the Judean Hills shows none of the serenity which Spencer felt towards Salonika.

'When years later he was able to paint the war and see it as something not altogether barren, but as possessing a sombre glory'.<sup>5</sup>

So wrote Elizabeth Rothenstein of Spencer's experiences in Salonika. It's landscape took on a 'magnificence'. This was transformed into reality in his mind on his arrival home.

'But the mystery was indeed there, even stronger and more significant by the dying light. He lay down and slept as if he had reached a haven'.<sup>6</sup>

This haven, is central to the Travoys, but not in Irish Troops. This is where the difference lies. For Lamb, the portrayal of the horror was his intention and this is self-evident from the painting. Spencer wished to see beyond the mere depiction of the obvious, to probe into the calm in the centre of all the destruction.



Both the Cookham Resurrection and the Burghclere Resurrection of the Soldiers, represent nearly 10 years of achievement. It was regarded by many as the high-point of an uneven career. It appears though, that having completed the Burghclere Chapel project, he had exhausted himself, both in his private life and his work, as it was to landscape he turned for the next few years. He wrote many years later of those Burghclere years:

It has been my way to make things - as far as I am able to fit me, so I did the Burghclere Memorial. That operation redeemed my experience from what it was; namely something alien to me. By this means I recover my lost self.✱

The lost-self referred to in this quotation, is his notion that a paradise can be realised in the present. He had the conviction that through the everyday experiences, a realisation of Paradise is possible. These two major works are witnessess to this belief. By examining these works we can share to some extent in that vision.

Hence the Soul cannot be possessed of the divine union, until it has divested itself of the love of created beings.

St. John of the Cross

CONCLUSION

All good art has to do with truth in a sense, but great art is concerned with a truth under the appearances, or truth transcendent. The great artist, then, is a man with genius to recognize the true immutable in this sense and to embody it with most perfect integrity in an art form.<sup>1</sup>

Thus wrote Elizabeth Rothenstein in the 1945 introduction to her book on Stanley Spencer. This attitude is not universally held towards Spencer's work, mainly perhaps because of the unevenness of quality. Time has not dealt kindly with Spencer's reputation as an artist. For many years his work has been marginalised by the British Art Establishment and he is accorded the somewhat dubious reputation of being an 'eccentric'. This belies much of the truth behind the work and in particular, the first half of his career. Spencer longed for a fusion in his work, this was between a vision of Christian love and brotherhood.

The Christian love as I've discussed in this thesis consists of the notion, that on earth there are places where God is present. From this, the ideas he had on brotherhood follow. Brotherhood for him was not merely uniting the peoples of the world, but was more that a perfect understanding must be forged between peoples of every background, race and colour. There were certain ambiguities present in Spencer's ideas on Christian love. As I've pointed out in the text, his religious background was unorthodox, and from that he always had difficulties in expressing any definite belief in God. Much of that belief of childhood was shattered by his war experiences and I feel they were never really regained.



Through Spencer's often extreme distortion of forms, he has surpassed much of what is purely literal in the works and this is perhaps where the portraiture and landscapes fail. From this distortion, comes an originality that unites the literal elements with the visionary or imaginative. In this imagination, he sees a need to clarify for himself the wholeness of things (by wholeness I mean this fusion between heaven and earth).

Much of what I've dealt with in this thesis concerns the spiritual in Spencer's work. This spirituality is affirmed in the Cookham Resurrection and the Burghclere Memorial Chapel projects. The more profane works I have not dealt with. Spencer's work developed during the 1930's and after becoming increasingly preoccupied with sex. Furthermore with this growing sexual imagery, came a separating rather than a unifying between the sacred and profane. I feel that his work deteriorated from this period onwards. He became involved in projects which were impracticable from the beginning. Coupled with this he had accrued mounting financial problems and personal insecurities, which led him into near ruin by the 1950's.

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of Spencer's career was his disregard for the modern movement before the Second World War, which certainly helped to marginalise him. Coupled with a certain innocence on his behalf comprised his skills as a designer of complex figure compositions. Perhaps what singles Spencer out from the many other artists of the period, is the way in which he set himself apart from any fashion or trend.

Spencer's art remains timeless, set apart from the constrictions of realism, it speaks to us of a joy and a celebration, as he spoke of Bach, 'like angels shrieking for joy'.<sup>1</sup>

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